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'Cheer Up Hamlet!': Using Shakespearean Burlesque to Teach the Bard

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# **“Cheer Up Hamlet!': Using Shakespearean Burlesque to Teach the Bard”**

**by Kendra Preston Leonard**

In his book *Not Shakespeare: Bardolatry and Burlesque in the Nineteenth Century*, Richard Schoch demonstrates the ways in which Shakespeare's works were frequently burlesqued in the music halls of the nineteenth century: through parodies directly adapting Shakespearean playtexts; by newly created works that sent up Shakespearean conventions; and in song and dance. Musical performances often combined traditional texts with popular songs or offered up new tunes to explicate or parody the actions or particular scenes in a play, usually in conjunction with some satire aimed at the leading actors and/or politicians of the day. By these means, the plotlines and characters of Shakespeare's plays were made widely known, even among non-theatre-going populations, those with only basic educations, and even the illiterate.

With the disappearance of vaudeville and other live variety theatre in the twentieth century, however, fully staged burlesques of Shakespeare have mostly faded from view, with perhaps the exception of The Reduced Shakespeare Company's "Complete Works" show. While a few films, such as *Strange Brew* (1983), engage in outright Shakespearean burlesque, most popular recent culture burlesquing of

Shakespeare has occurred on television and the internet, often using song as a vehicle parodying the plays, thus combining the satirical and musical elements of traditional burlesque.

The proliferation of these parodies and their increasing accessibility makes them ideal for teaching Shakespeare, particularly in general education courses or situations in which students have been previously conditioned that “Shakespeare is hard.” I suggest that using popular music parodies to introduce students to Shakespeare helps them approach the material in an inventive and entertaining way and prepares them for reading the plays by providing them with irreverent but not inaccurate summaries of the plots and characters. In this essay I will identify several recent musical burlesques of Shakespeare appropriate for the classroom and suggest activities using them.

Schoch notes that, particularly during the nineteenth century, there was concern that the popularity of burlesque might bring an end to serious productions. He states, “burlesque can never displace Shakespeare: because it cannot be understood *without* Shakespeare” (Schoch, 12) Indeed, “as audiences became less and less familiar with Shakespeare, they became less and less capable of appreciating a burlesque on Shakespeare.” While this may be true for the Victorians about whom Schoch writes, it is not necessarily true for modern audiences. Shakespeare appears so frequently in popular culture that even audiences who do not know the plays have at least a passing familiarity with the importance of the works in English literature, if not the basic plots

and/or characters of the best-known works. Whereas Victorian audiences may have needed to attend the theatre both straight or burlesqued Shakespeare, modern audiences are surrounded by Shakespeare's most popular phrases and parodies in a number of kinds of media. Shakespeare and his works have been used as a plot device or gimmick in television shows from *The Twilight Zone* and *Moonlighting* to *The Simpsons* and *Doctor Who*. Shakespeare has also been used extensively in television commercials to sell Klondike bars; Canada Dry; Red Bull (featuring Shakespearean actor Brian Blessed in the voice-over); ING; Nextel; T-Mobile (again using Romeo and Juliet); the Spike television network; and Levi's 501 jeans, using text from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the incidental music for the play by Mendelssohn. It is difficult to imagine that the majority of students have not previously encountered any references on television to Shakespeare or the plays.

The use of music to burlesque Shakespeare in late twentieth century culture is nearly as prevalent as his presence in commercials and popular shows. With the rise of YouTube and other user-created media outlets, parodists have discovered and made wide use of a new platform from which to broadcast their guitar-accompanied satires and gain followers. Song parodies that used to appear only on the Dr. Demento show or Weird Al albums are now far more readily available to the general public and are disseminated more broadly than before through new means of social media and media sharing such as Facebook. Both contrafacta, songs that set new text to a pre-existing

tune, and songs with original lyrics and music are popular in modern Shakespeare burlesque. Some examples include works ranging from The Beatles' spoof of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the "Othello Rap," from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare Abridged*, and the "Silly Songs of Shakespeare" show by the Old New Friends; to student works such as "Shakespeare's King Lear HD - In Song - Viva la Vida Parody" and a musical parody of *Macbeth* by students at El Camino Real High School. All of these clips can be used to both help students understand the texts they are reading and provide them with examples of parody as references for their own creations, which I discuss later in this essay.

Thus music, used in both nineteenth-century and modern burlesque to provide a structure for rhyme, narrative tension and form, and sheer entertainment purposes, is also a common tool of the educator. Allowing students to find ways of describing Shakespeare's plots or to grapple with the plays' language through music enables them to employ a familiar element while engaging with new concepts and materials. On a very basic level, setting Shakespearean text to music also helps students understand beat and meter in ways with which they are already conversational. Tom Sykes writes about the uses of music in his poetry classes, citing commonalities between certain meters and pop music and old ballads (Sykes 2011). Likewise, Brook Anderson, who teaches high school English, has her students listen to the *Gilligan's Island* theme song in order to absorb the rhythm and meter of the traditional ballad. She then has her

students sing various traditional and student-created ballad texts to the theme song tune in order to demonstrate the way most ballads share rhythmic and metrical attributes (Anderson, 2009).

These parodies and musical treatments of Shakespeare also help students break free from fear of difficult vocabulary and complex plotlines by illustrating the ways in which Shakespeare can be treated with humor and an irreverent manner, bringing his world closer to our own. As Maureen McMahon writes of teaching Shakespeare in a special issue of *The English Journal* devoted to teaching and humor.

While *Macbeth* is certainly a grim play, I even manage to provide a brief respite from all the bloodletting. I draw from an old musical we performed in college called *When Shakespeare's Ladies Sing* ([Charles] George [1951]). (This is not a particularly great musical; but, since we were an all girls' school, we were pretty limited.) I belt out the Lady Macbeth solo "Somnambulistic Lady." [...] Due to this "performance," my students never forget the sleepwalking scene or the meaning of somnambulistic (McMahon 70).

In the same issue, Colleen Ruggieri provides another example of using humor to teach the tragedies and histories; in an article on the effects of humor in the English classroom, she writes that by teaching her students to write their own puns, jingles, and other jokes based on wordplay, they are better prepared to understand Shakespeare's similar work with language, and are able to grasp the concepts of irony and satire more

quickly (Ruggieri 58). By acquainting students with the materials of wordplay, instructors offer them opportunities to close the distance between Shakespeare's language, characters, and concerns and the present day. These materials, especially jingles, require or lend themselves well to musical treatment, and setting text—such as definitions, plot elements, or character identifications—to short, pithy melodies can help listeners remember the content of the text more easily. Instructors can also use existing pop-music burlesques to illustrate irony, satire, and the humor of Shakespeare's plays in a medium already well-known to students and comfortable for them to discuss and analyze.

In teaching Shakespeare through burlesque, the use of music has multiple advantages over text-only burlesque. Using known tunes helps students remember the texts they or others set; it encourages students to think of rhyme and language; and it allows students to experiment with rhythm and meter in a hands-on fashion. All of these aspects prepare students for reading Shakespeare and better understanding the plots, the use of language, and how meter and rhythm function in the plays.

### **Old Tunes, New Texts**

Contrafacta can be useful for acquainting students with Shakespeare before reading, as well as used for reviewing events and characters after a reading is complete. "Shakespeare Pie," a parody of Don MacLean's "American Pie," that tells the story of

*Hamlet* is a perfect example of a Shakespearean burlesque contrafactum. Although “American Pie” was originally recorded by MacLean in 1971, recent covers by Madonna and other artists and parodies, particularly one by “Weird Al” Yankovic in which he sings about Anakin Skywalker from the *Star Wars* franchise, have made it popular with recent generations. In the course of “Shakespeare Pie,” the song references major plot points; uses the play’s most famous lines, thereby making them more familiar in a casual setting before readers encounter them in the text; introduces vocabulary such as “soliloquy,” “iambic” and “scansion;” and offers parallels to iconic pop culture events, phrases, people, and entertainment (“don’t tase me, bro!” and *The Princess Bride*, among others).

A long, long time ago  
I can still remember  
How, alas, poor Yorick’s jokes drew groans  
He’d dance and sing and kiss my hand  
Like Elsinore was Neverland  
But then he went and joined the Skull and Bones

And now, Horatio, I get shivers  
All the Globe has been dark  
’Cause something rots in Denmark  
[...]  
To be or to choose not to be?  
That’s the question I’m digestin’ in my soliloquy  
And when fortune aims its slings and arrows at me  
Tell me how I’m gonna live through Act III?  
Answer, please, iambically (“Sumsion”).



The anonymous blogger “Shakespeare Teacher” has contributed a series of contrafacta to the canon, including a Lady Gaga/*Hamlet* mash-up (“Mourn This Way”); a re-telling of Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII* to the old “Henry the Eighth, I Am!;” a *Richard III* parody called “Lady, It’s Warm Inside,” spoofing “Baby, It’s Cold Outside;” a *Midsummer Night’s Dream* ode to Titania set to “Titanium;” “Fat Jack,” about the glutinous knight, set to Ke\$ha’s “Tik Tok;” and a truly brilliant *Merry Wives of Windsor* parody called “I Schemed a Scheme,” set to “I Dreamed a Dream” from the musical and movie *Les*

*Miserables*:

There was a crime here in my mind,  
When I’d find these wives,  
And I’d come a-wooing.  
There was a crime to rob them blind,  
And I would earn their trust,  
And I’d be their undoing.  
There was a crime,  
Then it all went wrong.

I schemed a scheme so long ago,  
When a desperate man could earn a shilling.  
I schemed the husbands would not know;  
I schemed the wives would be more willing.  
I never gave a second thought,  
For schemes were gold, success expected.  
There was no fear of getting caught,  
No trap unsprung, no purse neglected.

(<http://www.shakespeareteacher.com>)

These songs all use either recent or well-known melodies, are appropriately matched with the text set to them, and parse Shakespeare in easily understandable language. At the same time, the songs don’t condescend to the listener; they don’t shy

away from Shakespearean language when it's appropriate to include it, and they often include in-jokes that listeners will understand fully only after reading the play referenced in the lyrics.

### **Teaching with Contrafacta**

Instructors can use contrafacta in several assignments with the goals of helping students understand a play's plot, vocabulary, and meaning. The first two assignments here assess students' reading progress and comprehension, and their ability to explain the play in their own words. They can also broadly identify the kind of music for the song—happy, sad, pop, rock—and ways in which it is appropriate for the new lyrics or burlesques them. For example, a happy, up-tempo song about *Romeo and Juliet* allows for a discussion of irony and satire. The third allows students to exercise their creative sides, and can be assigned to groups as well as individuals.

#### **Contrafacta Assignment 1**

In this assignment, students will listen to a specific contrafacta (from the examples above or found through your own research) before reading the play you are teaching. Ask students to identify plot points, events, and characters mentioned in the song based on their pre-reading knowledge of the play. As you read the play, ask students to refer

back to the song and find references in the song that they can now connect with the play or better understand after reading the play. Have students briefly analyze the contrafacta and write about its use as a prologue to reading the play. How did hearing the song about the play help them understand key events or actions in the play, recognize characters and motivations, or prepare them in other ways for reading the text? How did the music itself set the tone for the play? Was it happy or sad, ironic or sincere? Does the existing tune to which the new words are set have pre-existing connotations that connect in some way with the play?

## Contrafacta Assignment 2

Play a contrafacta for students after they have read the play and give them a copy of the lyrics. Ask them to explain the references in the song and note the location in the play for specific events and actions mentioned in the song. Again, ask about the music itself: is it happy, sad, fast, slow? Does it reflect the plot of the play in any way? Is it use ironically? Does the tune used have any relation to the play or a character?

### Contrafacta Assignment 3

Assign students the task of creating their own contrafactum after reading the play. You can assign a song for all students to use, or allow them to choose their own pre-existing songs for which to write new lyrics. If you assign a song, make sure that it is available free from several sources, such as YouTube or Spotify, for students who may be unfamiliar with it. **Students should hand in a document identifying the song's original title and creators, containing the new lyrics, and, if you wish, act, scene, and line numbers that correlate with the new lyrics, so that students must make direct associations between the text and their song. Students can perform their contrafacta in class, upload videos to a class site, or collaborate on performances of the best new lyrics as voted on by the entire class.**

### Original Songs

In addition to pop songs set with new text, there is a large body of original music that parodies or burlesques Shakespeare. While parodies from the sixteenth century onwards are available, more recent ones may catch the attention of students more easily. The New Old Friends theatre troupe performed an original musical summary of *Hamlet* at the Theatre Royal Bath as part of the 2012 Shakespeare Unplugged festival. Television's Horrible Histories group has also taken on Shakespeare in song, albeit

introducing listeners to many of the playwright's most famous phrases rather than any particular work. A quartet of students sends up *King Lear* and boy bands at the same time in their song about the play. But perhaps the best original modern parodies are those that open each season of the Canadian television show *Slings & Arrows*. *Slings and Arrows*, starring Paul Gross, Martha Burns, and Stephen Ouimette, was set at the fictional New Burbage Festival, a theatre company modeled on Canada's Stratford Festival, and ran for three seasons from 2003-2006. Each season's large arc mirrors the major Shakespeare play being produced by the festival at the time; season one focused on *Hamlet*; season two used *Macbeth*; and the third and final season saw a production of *King Lear*.

Each episode is introduced by a musical set piece in which two of the company's long-time actors perform songs at the piano in the theatre's bar for the rest of the cast. The songs were clearly written to provide knowledgeable audiences with a humorous take on the play of the season, and to offer a straightforward introduction to the play for audiences unfamiliar with the plays. The songs are written, like modern contrafacta, using a modern idiom and can be used outside of the context of the show. In addition to outlining the issues of the play under consideration, the songs also offer glimpses into the actors' views of the plays and characters, offering opportunities to discuss stage practices and traditions in Shakespeare, such as the "Macbeth curse," and playing Richard III as a hunchback.

In Season One, the introductory song “Cheer up Hamlet” serves first to summarize the play, with the first stanza providing a vernacular take on the situation:

So, your uncle is a cad,  
Murdered Dad and married Mum,  
That’s really no excuse to be as glum as you’ve become.  
So, wise up Hamlet,  
Rise up Hamlet,  
Buck up and sing the new refrain.

The song goes on to offer Hamlet some advice from the performers’ point of view:

Your incessant monologizing fills the castle with ennui,  
Your antic disposition is embarrassing to see,  
And by the way you sulky brat, the answer is To Be!  
You’re driving poor Ophelia insane!

So, shut up, you rogue and peasant!  
Grow up, it’s most unpleasant!  
Cheer up you melancholy Dane.

Season Two’s episodes begin with “I Won’t Play Mackers,” referring to the Festival’s production of *Macbeth*. The song primarily satirizes the superstition against speaking the play’s title in the theater and its reputation as a work that brings bad luck.

Call me superstitious or cowardly or weak  
But I’ll never play a character  
Whose name one dare not speak.  
[...]  
Every soul who plays this role  
Risks injury or death.  
I’d rather sweep the bloody stage  
Then ever do  
Mac-you-know-who.

In addition, the song's inner verses send up the typical conventions of the characteristics of other major male Shakespeare roles. The song for *King Lear*, staged in *Slings & Arrows'* third and final season, follows the same pattern of irreverently summarizing the play in the first stanza and following with further details:

When life takes its toll  
When fate treats you bad  
You used to be king,  
And now you've been had  
Alone with your fool  
you think you'll go mad  
It's nice to take a walk in the rain

Sending up Act 3, scene 2, the most famous—and emotionally fraught—scene of the play, the song gives audiences a roguish hint as to the action that will follow. “A Walk in the Rain” contrasts straightforward text describing the grotesquerie of the play — “kidnap your friend and gouge out his eyes” and “all have been slain” — with the child-like, onomatopoeic language of “pitter patter shower” and the simple one-syllable rhymes of the line ends. The pathos of this is offset by the music itself. The music is, like the previous season's themes, relentlessly happy.

The song for the end credits for all three seasons, “Call the Understudy,” burlesques theatre traditions much like “Mackers,” as well as gives a brief nod and a wink to audiences knowledgeable about *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Call the understudy  
I can't go on tonight  
I'm drinking with my buddy  
I'm getting good and tight

Before they raise the curtain I'll be higher than a kite

So call the understudy  
I can't go on tonight  
Tell the cast and crew to break a leg (break a leg!)  
Roll me out another bloody keg (bloody keg!)  
I need to ease the pain that life can bring  
And liquor is what will hit the spot  
The play is *not* the thing

The song reminds or informs audiences of the theatre tradition of saying "break a leg" rather than "good luck," and gives them some insider information on what actors need to know other than their lines in any given production by referencing diction and lighting.

Other songs that reference Shakespeare or the plays or sonnets and can be used to introduce plot points, characters, and perceptions thereof include "The King Must Die" by Elton John; "Miss Macbeth" by Elvis Costello; "Cordelia" by The Tragically Hip; and "Ariel" by October Project. The Folger Shakespeare library maintains a list of similar songs on its website at ["Play On: Songs Inspired by Shakespeare."](#)

There are also songs about Shakespeare and the plays that include factual errors or errors of interpretation. These works can be used to facilitate discussion about the facts of Shakespeare's life and the plots of the plays. A recent example is Taylor Swift's "Love Story," which purports to tell the story of *Romeo and Juliet* but instead conflates a number of sources and references (including *The Scarlet Letter*) and in the end has



Romeo telling Juliet that, “I talked to your dad, go pick out a white dress/it’s a love story baby just say yes” (Swift).

Ultimately, studying existing or creating new burlesque song treatments of Shakespeare can be a useful educational tool in working with students at a variety of levels. Song encourages students to have fun with what for many is an intimidating subject, explore language, rhyme, and meter, and find ways of parsing Shakespearean language in their own terms. It also offers opportunities for students to be creative and perform for classmates, all while allowing instructors to chart student reading progress and comprehension.

## **Assignments Using Original Songs**

### **Original Songs Assignment 1**

Have students listen to one of the *Slings and Arrows* songs if you are teaching one of these three plays, or “Call the Understudy.” Ask them to explain the references to the play in question or the theatrical traditions mentioned in the song. Have them describe the tone of the song: is it sympathetic to or satirical in regard to the play, events, or characters referenced? Do the rhythms and meters of the lyrics echo any parts of the play? Who is the intended audience?

## Original Songs Assignment 2

Have students create their own original songs or raps about the play they are studying. (Rap is often easier for students with little or no musical training.) Ask students to select three or four important lines from the play they are reading, and create lyrics that use one line in each stanza of a song. They should create a document that includes the new song's or rap's lyrics, and like the contrafacta assignment, the act, scene, and line numbers that correlate with the lyrics. Students who read music can be encouraged to write down their new song in standard notation, guitar tabs, or guitar chord notation. Record the best songs as determined by a class vote, and post the recordings to the class website or YouTube.

## Original Songs Assignment 3

In another creative assignment, ask students to create a song about theatrical or historical traditions or events that are connected with a particular play. Thus, a class reading *Richard III* might write about the recent discovery of the king's bones in an English car park, a class reading *Hamlet* might sing about the mime show that comes before *The Mousetrap* or the doubling of the actor playing the Ghost and Claudius, and a

class reading *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night* could write a song about cross-dressing in the plays. Again the results can be captured for posting to a class site or online.

## **Conclusions**

Teaching Shakespeare with music, whether it is newly created or decades old, is a way of bringing students and the text closer together. By using a medium that almost all students are familiar and comfortable with, instructors can help readers better understand both technical aspects of Shakespeare's language, such as meter and rhythm, as well as narrative elements including plot, character development, and motive. Assigning the analysis of songs encourages students to read closely, while asking students to create their own new lyrics and music gives the the opportunity to show their own creativity while still demanding reading comprehension and coherent writing, organization, and citation skills. Finally, musical treatment of material aids in remembering important facts about language and individual works. As those of us who grew up with Schoolhouse *Rock* can attest, adding a melody and some rhythm to even the most prosaic facts has helped us retain that information. In teaching Shakespeare, we can take to heart the author's own words, and play on.

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